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Oral English Course at Kurume Institute of Technology

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Abstract

Kurume Institute of Technology employed a full time native American English teacher to teach "Oral English", a required course for freshman students. To create a better learning situation for Oral English, "half-sized" classes of between 25 and 30 students were formed. An English placement test was used to divide the freshmen into higher or lower English abilities so that students of same ability could be taught together. The new English teacher's teaching method is briefly discussed along with performance results for the spring 1995 class. There was a statistically significant increase in English listening abilities observed. At semester's end students were given a questionnaire to ascertain the amount of the teacher's English they felt they understood. The results vary between 65% and 77%, which was felt to be an acceptable level for students who were first-time listening and speaking learners.

1. Introduction

The new English curriculum introduced to Kurume Institute of Technology in 1993 has two distinguishing features. One is the systematic arrangement of English courses for Science and Technology, and the other is the inclusion of a course called "Oral English" as one of the required courses for freshman students¹⁾. This new course has invited a native English teacher, and in 1994, a full-time lecturer, Peter Horstmann, the co-author of this paper, was employed.

Every year our Institute admits about 450 freshmen. Since oral language courses require much personal contact between an instructor and individual learners, the number of students in a class should be limited to as few as possible. However, in the university educational environment, the best we can do is to divide a class in half, which creates smaller classes of between 25 and 30 students. Each semester, half of the freshman students take "Oral English", while the other half take "Basic Technical English", which is another required course for freshmen. Although these "half-sized" classes are an improvement, they may not be called "small sized" according to the definition of a small size class employed by JACET (the Japan Association of College English Teachers), which considers a small size class to be less than 20 students. Nevertheless, the introduction of "half-sized" classes for required English courses for non-English major students is an outstanding way of class formation preceded by very few colleges and universities in Japan.

Another strategy employed in the formation of the above two required courses is that each class is divided into two groups based on the results of the English placement test. Each year we give an English placement test to all the new students on the first day of freshman orientation after the university entrance ceremony. The upper score group will take "Oral English" in the spring semester, while the lower score group takes "Basic Technical English". In the fall semester, this situation is reversed and the lower score group will take Oral English while the upper score

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Table 1 Level of Placement Test Questions

Language Level	Number of Questions
1st year junior high school	1
2st year junior high school	3
3st year junior high school	2
1st year senior high school	3
2nd year senior high school	1

Table 2 Analysis of Placement Test

Department	M		T		A		E	
Class	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
Class Average	4.54	4.98	5.36	4.68	4.72	4.11	4.98	4.2
Dept. Average	4.82		4.97		4.37		4.46	
Total Average	4.71							

group takes Basic Technical English. Thus, class size is limited to a comparatively small number of students, and students with similar language abilities are kept together. Consequently, the instructors of Oral English as well as Basic Technical English can choose materials fit for the particular class language level, and teach in a way that is best for the level of the class. Closer attention can be given to the individual student's needs.

2. Placement Test

The English placement test consists of 10 simple, short-answer questions. It lasts only 15 minutes. Each correct answer receives 1 point. Table 1 shows the level of difficulty of the questions on our English placement test and the number of questions in each category.

The range of the language level of the questions is from the first year of junior high school to the second year of senior high school. Only 40 percent of the questions are from senior high school level, and the remainder is from junior high school level.

Table 2 presents the results of the placement test.

The mean score for all the four departments was 4.71, but, there were fairly wide differences of scores between the classes. Class means range from 4.11 to 5.36. The results show that there are not only wide differences between departments, but also differences between the two classes within each department.

Fig. 1 shows the distribution of the students according to their scores.

As is seen in Fig. 1, only two students got a perfect score of 10 points, while 13 students got a score of zero. The largest group lies at 4 points. After dividing the classes into two groups, the mean score of the upper score group was 6.47, and the lower score group averaged 2.72. The wide differences in test performance indicate a particularly strong need to divide classes into two levels. Teaching a class of mixed ability students often has the effect of halting the progress of the higher score students who want to move faster, and discouraging the performance of the lower score students who have trouble keeping up with the rest of the class.

3. Oral English Class at Kurume Institute of Technology

3.1 Need for Motivation

The study of a foreign language is never easy. The time period needed to become a fluent speaker of a foreign

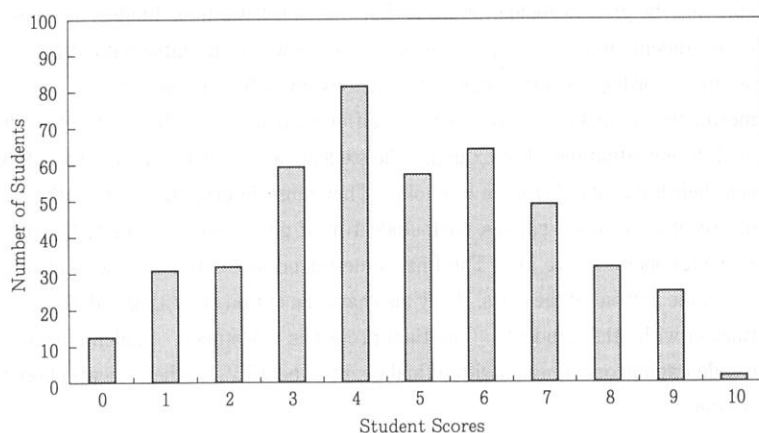


Fig. 1 Distribution of Scores

language is long and equal to that needed to master any highly complex academic discipline, for example physics or chemistry. Because learning a language is difficult, time demanding and often seen as having no practical purpose, university students need every motivational push that the teacher can give. Motivation is also particularly important in an Oral English class because it is a unique place where students must practice and demonstrate their listening and speaking skills for an hour and a half, each class meeting. Most university learning is a private activity between the student and his pen, paper, and book. In an Oral English class the student must stand up, speak, and show his embarrassment and knowledge (or lack of knowledge) to the other students. This is never easy.

To create motivation within the student, the content of an Oral English course must be interesting. The Oral English course at Kurume Institute of Technology tries to create listening and speaking tasks centered around subjects that relate to the lives of college students. For example, dating, marriage, hobbies, getting a job, food, sports, pop music, or money are some chosen topics. Listening and talking about these topics gives the students the opportunity to discuss things they are familiar with and have personal opinions about. During this use of their English language skills, they learn how to express their ideas, add to their English vocabulary, and practice grammatical structures that were previously only seen in a textbook.

3.2 Class Plan

Each 90 minutes' class period is usually divided into 5 parts of class work: (1) introduction to the new material, (2) vocabulary study, (3) pair work, (4) question-answer period, and (5) review of the day's work.

At the beginning of an Oral English class, the teacher will talk to the students for 10-15 minutes about the topic of the day's class. If the textbook is being used, the teacher will have the students turn to a page where vocabulary is listed. The teacher will explain the meaning of 4-10 words or expressions in English (if it is possible) or give the Japanese translation (a last resort). The students are then given 6-10 questions in the book to study and practice, asking and answering the questions out loud to their assigned partners. This practice is called "Pair Work" and it is meant to allow the students to practice without worrying about their mistakes. The teacher then walks around the classroom giving vocabulary advice if it is asked for, or he questions the students individually to see if they understand the sentences in the book and the vocabulary. Next, the teacher has the students stop practicing, and asks them questions directly. The teacher corrects the students' grammatical mistakes or helps with the answers.

Because even the best textbook can become routine or present similar patterns of English use, the teacher also uses exercises taken from different textbooks, or presents the students with creative problems to solve. For

example, the students may be given a logical problem that they must use their English abilities to talk over, solve and explain. Also, the students might be asked to explain the answer of a mathematical puzzle; or they might be asked to draw a picture according to very specific instructions given by the teacher.

During the semester the students must also perform different tasks in English in front of the rest of the class (public speaking) in different situations. For example, the students are given the assignment of explaining how they might travel between their home and Tenjin in Fukuoka. They must describe this to the other students in the class in very exact detail. During the first 2 classes, each student must give a short speech to the rest of the class about his hobbies, interests and hopeful future job. The final semester project is to have the students give a 2-5 minute speech about a chosen topic in front of the class. They also have the option of writing and performing a short comical skit (sungeki) in English with other students. The final project is videotaped. Students have the choice between participating in this videotaping, or taking a written final exam. About 75% of the students chose videotaping during the 1995 spring semester.

4. Student Evaluation

The students are given a series of short speaking and listening tests (5-6) during the semester and a final exam. The listening tests consist of a short paragraph of conversational style, narrative English read by the teacher. The students must answer 4-5 questions after hearing the reading selection 3 times. The questions are written on the blackboard, and the student must write out the answer instead of choosing between multiple choice items in a test booklet. The students are also given 2-3 short speaking exams during the semester. Speaking exams can take up more than one class meeting, depending on the English level and size of the class being tested.

4.1 Listening

Three listening tests were given during the Spring 1995 semester and the results were as follows:

Table 3 Quiz 1-3, Means and SD's

	Mean	SD
Quiz 1	7.95	1.94
Quiz 2	8.56	1.26
Quiz 3	8.27	1.56

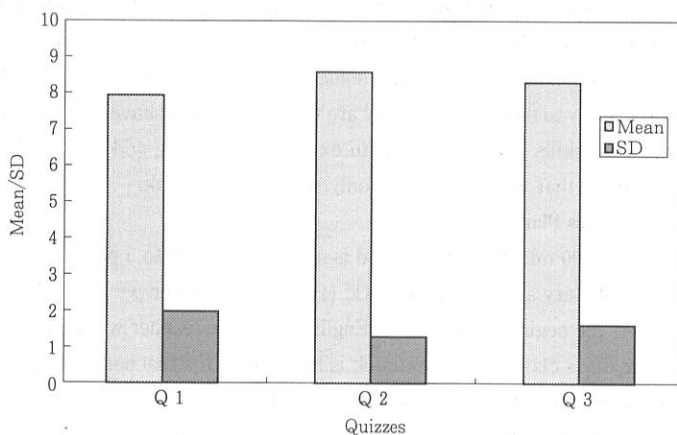


Fig. 2 Means & SD--Quizzes 1-3

The first listening quiz was the easiest of the three, and the material was read by the teacher in a slow, "emphasized manner". By "emphasized manner", it is meant that there is greater separation between the teacher's spoken words than exists in normal native English speaking. The reading selection for Quiz 1 was exactly the same for all 8 classes, but some of the information was changed for each class. The Quiz 1 mean for the 8 classes was 7.95 and the SD (standard deviation) 1.94. Quiz 1 had the lowest mean of the 3 quizzes, and the largest SD. A SD

indicates the amount of variation away from the mean in a sampled population²⁾. If a SD is large, either the group of students taking a test have very different abilities, or the test is not a good one. Here, the SD is not large enough to indicate a problem of this kind.

Quiz 2 was given 2 weeks later, and the mean is higher (8.56) and the SD lower (1.26). The students performed better and there was less variation from the mean score. The material for Quiz 2 was a little more difficult than Quiz 1, and the teacher read the material more quickly and spoke in a less “emphasized manner”. The improvement from Quiz 1 to Quiz 2 was statistically significant (t-Test, $p < 0.01$, $t = -3.61$, $t_{critical} = 1.97$). A “t-Test” is a statistical test that can tell us if scores on 2 tests are the result of “chance”, or the result of better performance³⁾. The t-score here says that the possibility of the better performance being due to “chance”, is less than 1 out of 100.

It must be cautioned, however, that testing “new listening students” is not as accurate as testing students who have had some prior English listening experience. Very few students entering Kurume Institute of Technology have had the experience of a native English teacher in high school or junior high school. This is their first time hearing native English on a weekly basis.

A “new listening student” may have a problem with one word that prevents him from being able to answer a question, although he understands all the other words. A more advanced listening student, although he misses one word, can understand a word’s meaning from the surrounding context of the sentence. Also, among “new listening students”, better English students may perform worse on a listening or speaking exam than a poorer English student. A poorer English student will just pass over an unknown word. There are many words he does not understand. Being more of a perfectionist, a better student may linger at an unknown word until he gets it, and then miss what comes next.

Quiz 3 was given as a sort of experiment to compare student performance with old material against new material. Half the students got a quiz very similar to Quiz 1 (control group) and the other half (experimental group) got a Quiz with totally new content. On Quiz 3, although the mean is higher than Quiz 1, it is lower than that of Quiz 2. (See Table 3 and Fig. 2.) The SD follows the same pattern. It is higher than Quiz 2, but lower than that of Quiz 1.

Table 4 Quiz 3, Mean and SD
---Control vs. Experimental
Group

	Mean	SD
Control Group	8.53	1.54
Experimental Group	7.81	1.61

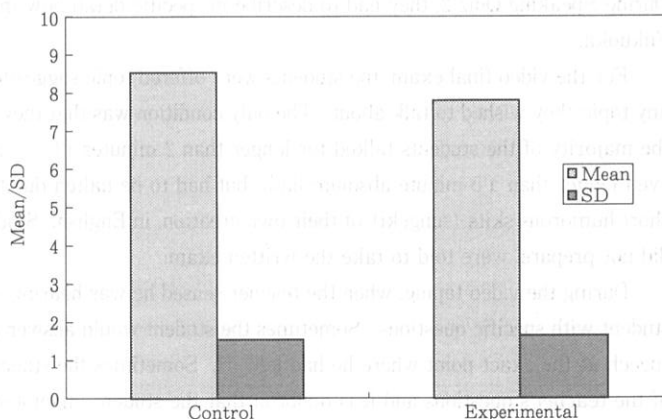


Fig. 3 Quiz 3 Control & Experimental Group
Means and SD's

The results agree with the expectation, but only partly so. The students that had old material (control group) did do better than those that had new material (experimental group). See Table 4 and Fig. 3 (mean of 8.53 vs. mean

of 7.81). But nearly all students (7 classes out of 8) did worse on Quiz 3 than Quiz 2. This is probably due to the fact that the teacher read Quiz 3's listening selection more quickly, at a speed fairly close to that of a native English speaker. Although the content was not thought to be a great deal more difficult in either quiz, reading at a native English speaker's speed made it more difficult.

The t-Test was used again to compare the results of the control and experimental groups ($p < .01$, $t = 3.16$, $t_{critical} = 2.35$). The t-value shows that the difference between control and experimental groups was probably not due to chance, but the test content.

4.2 Speaking

A difficulty with giving speaking tests and evaluating them is that many students memorize the material that they are to be tested on. Although the student is to be commended for the effort of writing a speech and memorizing it, this is not exactly what an Oral English teacher is seeking. The teacher wants the student to use his immediate language skills, and be able to understand what he has spoken and answer questions the teacher asks.

It is often the case that Japanese students do not want to speak an English sentence unless it is a perfect English sentence. Often they do not want to reply to a question from the teacher until they have received advice from the other students sitting around them, and until they are 100% certain that their answer is both appropriate and correct. Unfortunately, this is not the most productive way to learn a foreign language. Students must be willing to make mistakes. It is here that the teacher's job is the most difficult. The teacher must be patient and wait for the answer, and also be perceptive and know when to push the student. Sometimes the student is just stalling and doesn't know the answer. Sometimes the waiting is fruitful, and the student needed some extra time to formulate a thoughtful and well composed answer. The factor of class size becomes crucial here. If the class is large, not every student will have the opportunity to speak, or he will be rushed before giving a complete answer. If the student does not have the opportunity to speak, his speaking skills will not improve. Even with a class size of 30 students, it can take more than one class meeting to have each student speak 2-3 sentences in English.

The students were given 2-3 formal speaking tests. During Speaking Quiz 1, the students had to introduce themselves to the class and say several sentences about themselves and their hobbies and hopes for the future. During Speaking Quiz 2, they had to describe in specific detail how they would travel from their home to Tenjin in Fukuoka.

For the video final exam, the students were offered topic suggestions, but were also told that they could choose any topic they wished to talk about. The only condition was that they must speak for at least 2 minutes. However, the majority of the students talked for longer than 2 minutes (3-5+minutes). Many were prepared to speak for even longer than a 5 minute absolute limit, but had to be halted due to lack of time. Some students chose to give short humorous skits (sungeki) of their own creation, in English. Students that wanted to take the video exam, but did not prepare, were told to take the written exam.

During the video taping, when the teacher sensed he was hearing something memorized, he would interrupt the student with specific questions. Sometimes the student would answer the questions and then resume his memorized speech at the exact point where he had left off. Sometimes the student was not able to understand or answer any of the teacher's questions and it is doubtful that the student understood the words that he had memorized. Some students did not appear to memorize speeches, and were able to elaborate on their spoken words and answer the teacher's questions. This is the response that the teacher wanted most, and he sometimes got it.

Because speaking in a conversational manner and responding to questions was thought to be nearly above the abilities of first-time listening and speaking students, it was decided not to grade the speaking tests in a quantitative, but in a qualitative manner. If it was apparent to the teacher that the student had put visible effort into his speech, or he was able to display his speaking abilities to good effect, he was graded accordingly. If the student did not

prepare or perform adequately, he was told to take the written final exam. If he was somewhere between these 2 extremes, he was also graded accordingly. Although it was impossible to evaluate the students' speaking skills in a satisfactory quantitative manner, the teacher felt it was perhaps the most important English learning experience that the students received in the Oral English class. If the student appeared to have put strong effort into his speech, he received a higher grade than might otherwise have been given. This was done to encourage the students' speaking efforts.

4.3 Student English Confidence Levels

In Japan, English is usually taught by Japanese instructors who have the ability to explain the complexities of English in Japanese. The Oral English course at Kurume Institute of Technology is taught in English by a native English speaker, who uses English and not Japanese in the classroom. This can have both positives and negatives. Having a native English teacher teaching *in English*, provides the opportunity for students to hear native English speech. The fact that everything the students do in class must be accomplished *in English*, also provides an added motivation to learn English. They can't function in the classroom without it. However, this situation also presents a situation where the students might not understand a great deal of what the teacher says.

To find out how much English the students thought they understood in the Oral English class, a questionnaire (written and responded to in Japanese), was given to the students at the end of the spring 1995 semester. The questionnaire was confidential and consisted of 5 questions. The last 4 questions asked what the students liked and didn't like about the course, and how it could be improved. The first question asked each student the percentage of questions asked in class, that he thought he understood. The teacher, however, was unhappy with the question used ("What percent of the English in questions that the teacher asked did you understand?"), but could not think of a less ambiguous one. The teacher could have asked, "What percentage of the teacher's English in the short lecture at the beginning of class did you understand?", but thought this was a worse choice. He decided on the former because this was a major activity of the class: question and answer. Throughout the entire 90 minutes, every student could expect to be asked a question several times.

Table 5 Listening Quiz Means vs. Confidence Levels

Class	Quiz Mean	Confidence Level Mean
1	8.37	6.86
2	8.04	6.57
3	8.18	6.47
4	7.94	6.58
5	8.34	6.79
6	8.18	6.81
7	8.23	7.68
8	8.65	7.17

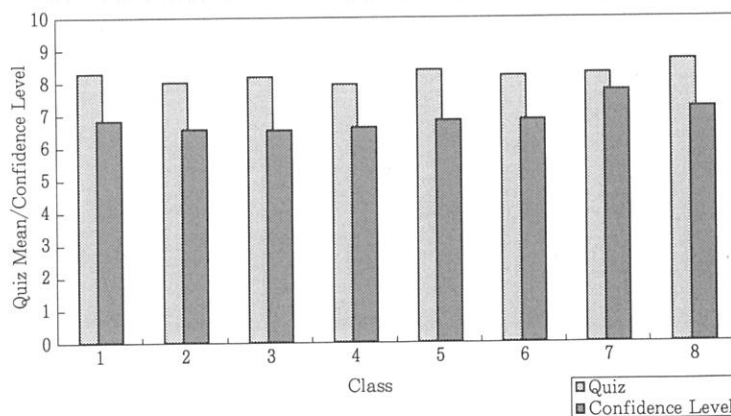


Fig. 4 Listening Quiz Means vs. Confidence Levels

The responses from the 8 classes about how much English they understood in the questions ranged from 64.7% to 76.8%. See Table 5 and Fig. 4. However, these figures cannot be used to determine in a quantitative way, what

the students understood. The question is an extremely difficult one for a student to answer. The question was what the students thought they understood. And as can be seen in Fig. 4, there is no consistent relationship between what the students thought they understood and their actual performance on listening quizzes. Because the questionnaire was confidential, individual responses could not be matched to individual performance, which might have been more revealing. The figures, however, do give some estimation of each student's confidence in his English understanding, and also reflect the difficulty of the Oral English course. This 65% to 75% confidence level was thought to be an acceptable one. If the students said they understood more than 65-75%, it would indicate that the course was too easy; if lower, then the course was too difficult.

5. Summary

One semester of Oral English is too short for students to become fluent in English. They need to continue practicing or listening for a more extended period of time after the completion of the course. However, Oral English provides an opportunity for all the freshman students to study the language with a native speaker. It also gives them a chance to understand cultural differences as well as similarities through the process of language acquisition. Oral English is a course to motivate students to study oral communication skills, and to encourage them to practice speaking English without the fear of making mistakes. It is a course which leads their study to actual language performance. The inclusion of more advanced courses to the English curriculum will help the students improve their communication ability which they may need in the future in foreign travels or at work.

Notes

- 1) Kimiko Tokunaga, Hisako Yamauchi, Hiroshi Izaki: New Curriculum and English CAI Laboratory, *Technology Report of Intelligence Engineering Laboratory*, No.7, 1994.
- 2) Seliger, Herbert W. and Shohamy, Elana. *Second Language Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
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